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## The Role of Iranian EFL Teacher Autonomy and Reflectivity in Teacher Self-directed Learning: A Systematic Literature Review

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### ABSTRACT

Globally various barriers hinder English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners from developing English communicative competence. Concern in this regard is also raised in the context of Iran. Two themes that strongly emerge from the vast number of publications on the causes of poor EFL learning outcomes in Iran include the need for teacher reflectivity and teacher autonomy. Scholarly publications outside the context of EFL underline these two constructs as necessary components of teacher self-directed learning as a prerequisite for the transformation of education. The frequent focus on these two elements in the literature in the context of EFL in Iran has motivated a systematic literature review to determine how these publications point towards a possible relationship between these two elements, with a specific focus on the role such a relationship could play in self-directed learning by EFL teachers in order to change poor learning outcomes. Using commonly agreed criteria for inclusion into the data set, the two researchers perused an initial 1006 publications identified through a systematic review of the literature, after which 43 publications were selected for analysis. The 6 themes that emerged from the analysis strongly point to a relationship between EFL teacher autonomy, teacher reflectivity and teacher self-directed learning. Role players in EFL, not only in Iran but also globally, should pay heed to the voices raised in the literature concerning the consequences of under-valuing these constructs in EFL teacher preparation courses if the aim is to secure sustainable transformation of EFL practice.

**Keywords:** teacher autonomy; EFL; self-directed learning (SDL); teacher reflectivity; teacher self-directed learning

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## Introduction and theoretical orientation

Globally, literature reports on poor English competence as outcome of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programmes. This phenomenon is reported in the context of countries such as Russia (Stakanova, 2018), Korea (Jeong, 2018), the Arab world nations (Fareh, 2010), and Saudi Arabia (Alsowat, 2017; Sharma, 2018), to name but a few. In light of the socio-economic role played by English globally, there is a pressing need for knowledge on the underlying factors hampering English competence as an EFL program outcome.

Concern is also raised in Iran about the poor English competence at high school exit level (Mazdayasna & Molaci, 2015; Sadeghi & Richards, 2015), and even after completing English spoken language courses offered by private language institutes (Sadeghi & Richards, 2015). Priority given to academic success rather than Iranian learners' English communicative competence on school level (Dahmardeh, 2009) as well as on tertiary education level (Zare-Behtash et al., 2016) is mentioned as contributing to the poor EFL learning outcomes. Sadeghi and Richards remark that Iranians enrolling in private language institutes rather evaluate the effectiveness of an English course based on their personal successful mastering of the language, as well as the way the course help them to improve their spoken-language proficiency with the anticipation to pass international tests (IELTS and/or TOFEL), studying or working abroad or to live in an English-speaking country. Sadeghi and Richards emphasise that EFL education in Iran is clearly in need of transformation on school level, while this need is also reported on the level of tertiary education (Farhady et al., 2010) and at private language institutes (Sadeghi & Ghaderi, 2018). The teacher as the primary role player in learning outcomes will play a major role in any transformation in education (Toropova et al., 2019). To effectuate such change, teachers need to acquire lacking knowledge and skills that will again rely on a reflective approach to practice as part of self-directed teacher learning to serve as agents for their own learning and development (Slavit & McDuffie, 2013). The value of self-directed teacher learning in transforming education is grounded in theories of Knowles (1975) (adult self-directed learning) and Mezirow (2009) (transformative learning).

Knowles (1975, p.18) defines self-directed learning in relation to own learning as “a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help from others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying human and material resources, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes”. The literature corroborates the fact that teacher autonomy influences the way teachers act as self-directed professionals, including involvement in their own professional development through self-directed teacher learning (Han, 2017; Huang & Benson, 2013; Kelley, 2012; Little, 1995; Smith & Erdoğan, 2008; Smith, 2000; Wagner, 2011). Through continuous learning *from* and *in* practice, teachers are able to direct their own professional growth (Lampert, 2010) that will equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to improve their practice within their specific teaching context (Han, 2017; Wagner, 2011).

Critical reflection on own assumptions is at the core of Mezirow's (1990; 1998) transformative learning theory, implying that teachers who develop a critical reflective stance to their own practice will be more motivated to change their teaching strategies, as necessary. Critical reflection on one's own practice thus clearly underscores teacher self-directed learning with emphasis on teachers taking responsibility for their own development and consequent improvement of own practice (Kiely, 2005; Kiely & Davis, 2010; Rufo, 2014).

The interrelatedness between teacher autonomy, teacher reflectivity and teacher self-directed learning is emphasised in the literature (Brookfield, 2017; Hacker & Barkhuizen, 2008; Little, 1995; Nunan & Lamb, 1996; Sinclair, 2008; Vieira et al., 2008). The OECD (2016) defines teacher

autonomy as “teachers’ decision-making power over aspects related to their work”. This review acknowledges the “multidimensional nature and contextual embeddedness of teacher autonomy” (Wermke et al., 2019, p. 307), as well as the reality that teacher autonomy does not always guarantee successful learning outcomes (Varatharaj, 2018) and the dependency of teacher autonomy on “personal and external factors that determine behaviour” (Wilches, 2007, p. 258). Nevertheless, the literature strongly supports the influence of teacher autonomy on different areas of a teacher’s functions (Kolleck, 2019; Parker, 2015; Wermke et al., 2019). One of these areas is the capacity to take responsibility for one’s own professional learning (OECD, 2016). Teacher reflectivity points to a reflective practice which is defined by Farrell (2015b) as follow:

*a cognitive process accompanied by a set of attitudes in which teachers systematically collect data about their practice, and, while engaging in dialogue with others, use the data to make informed decisions about their practice both inside and outside the classroom. (p. 123)*

A reflective approach to practice as part of self-directed teacher learning enables teachers to serve as agents for their own learning and development (Slavit & McDuffie, 2013). In this sense, when teachers are granted the autonomy to make choices for best practice based on knowledge gained through critical reflection on their own practice, self-directed teacher learning has the propensity to transform EFL practice to strengthen the sustainability of transformation, and consequently improve learning outcomes.

The large number of investigations with a focus on teacher autonomy and teacher reflectivity in the context of EFL teaching in Iran raised our curiosity with regard to the way this body of scholarship points to a possible relationship between these two constructs in EFL education and the possible effect such a relationship might have on EFL teacher self-directed learning. Exposing general trends in the literature can shed light on the interrelationship between these constructs and the role of such an interrelationship in the sustainable improvement of EFL practice. In light of the support for such a relationship as is clear from acclaimed international literature reported above, findings on such relationships in the context of Iran could also hold meaning for EFL globally. These two researchers, therefore, set out to explore the role of the relationship between teacher autonomy and teacher reflectivity in support of self-directed learning by EFL teachers in Iran. An analysis of the literature in this field was also expected to enlighten EFL teacher preparation courses and professional development programmes of the role of these constructs in EFL outcomes.

However, it is difficult to construe the nature of this relationship from the abundance of existing literature on these topics. Mallet et al., (2012) suggest a systematic literature review when an overall picture of existing literature findings is required to direct future research. The interrelationship between the three constructs constituted the theoretical-conceptual framework that served as a preliminary lens for a systematic literature review and guided the identification, categorising, analysis and synthesis of the body of scholarship. Considering the nature of the research question, this study focused on a qualitative synthesis of the characteristics and findings of the studies included (The Cochrane Collaboration, 2011), and therefore did not include a meta-analysis of the literature.

The following research question guided the review:

What role does the relationship between teacher autonomy and teacher reflectivity play in supporting self-directed learning by EFL teachers in Iran?

## Method

A systematic literature review is a rigid method to collect empirical evidence from the body of scholarship that meets specific eligibility criteria in order to answer a specific research question (Bearman et al., 2012; Ryan, 2010; The Cochrane Collaboration, 2011). However, Mallett et al. (2012) recommend a more flexible approach with a focus on the value that such a method holds for a specific investigation rather than its rigid application. The purpose of the study, namely, to investigate the way the literature, in the context of EFL in Iran, points to a relationship between the specific concepts, motivated the linear process suggested by Mallett et al. (2012). The iterative nature of a systematic literature review typically requires changes in the original review protocol (Moher, et al. 2009). An adapted version of the four-phase flow diagram suggested by PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) (Moher et al. 2009) demonstrates the process followed to identify the final articles for analysis (Fig. 1). The initial literature search resulted in records that were screened after which eligibility criteria were applied to identify the articles to be included in the qualitative synthesis (Moher et al. 2009).

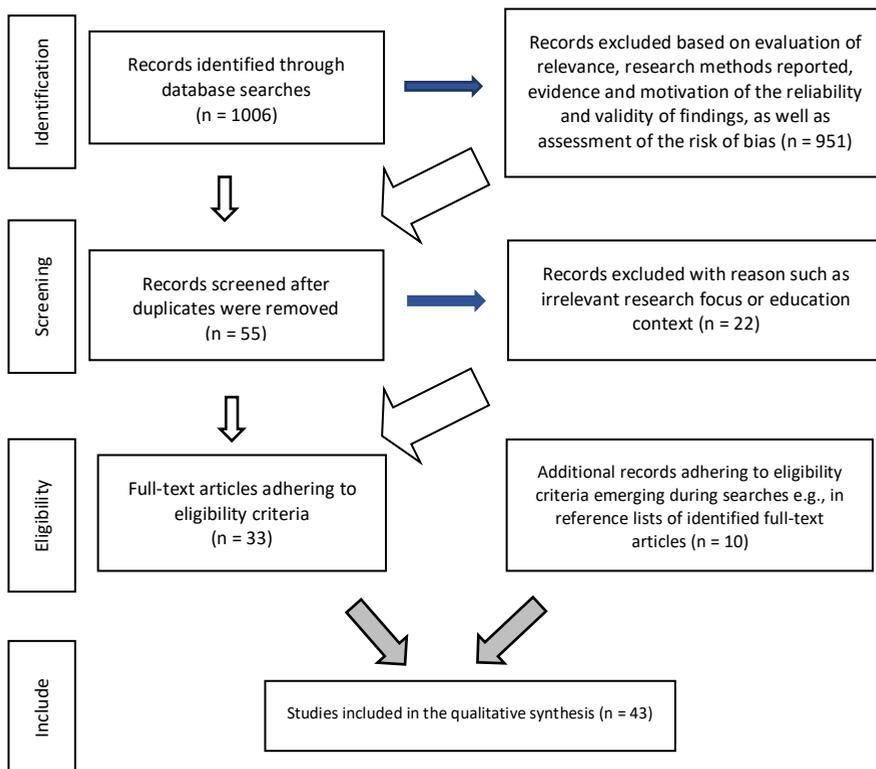


Figure 1. Systematic Literature Review Process (adapted from Moher et al. 2009)

Firstly, we deconstructed the research question by considering the context and the constructs involved; these concepts formed the basis of our database searches. A protocol was created collaboratively that gave details about definitions, search strings, search strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria and our approach to the synthesis. These eligibility criteria enabled the

researchers to detect literature specifically relevant to the problem. The protocol was piloted after which the search strategy was revised. Applying the protocol, a systematic search was then conducted by the researchers to retrieve literature from identified academic databases. All retrieved records were screened by both researchers based on the relevance of the title, abstract and full text, by employing the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The quality of all identified literature was assessed through joint evaluation of the relevance, research methods reported, evidence and motivation of the reliability and validity of the findings, as well as assessment of the risk of bias. Both researchers kept track of each database search by noting down the date of the search, the authors, date of publication, occurrence of the keywords and the focus of each publication.

Studies that were included in the final analysis were characterised by study quality, aim of the study, outcomes, research design, findings and recommendations. Lastly, a thematic synthesis was used to extract pertinent qualitative data from the literature included to synthesise evidence of a relationship between EFL teacher autonomy and reflectivity as well as how such a relationship could influence teacher self-directed learning.

Themes were derived from the research question stated above and keywords related to each theme were identified, namely:

- *teacher autonomy* and related concepts '*teacher agency*' and '*teacher identity*'
- *reflectivity* and related concepts '*critical reflection*' and '*critical thinking*'
- *English as a foreign language* and the acronym *EFL*
- *Iran*

Only publications from 2010 to 2019 and with reference to the identified keywords that appeared in the full text were eligible for the review and the literature searches conducted by both researchers used all possible combinations of the keywords in five multidisciplinary search engines. Gusenbauer and Haddaway (2019) evaluate EBSCOhost, Science Direct, Web of Science and Scopus as principal resources that meet all necessary quality requirements while Google Scholar is considered as "supplementary resource that could be used in addition to a principal resource for its specific qualities that could retrieve additional records and to further improve the evidence base" (p. 196). Reference lists of these identified records were also scrutinized for relevant seminal sources frequently cited in this field. These sources were considered collaboratively for possible inclusion in the analysis process.

Literature that met the criteria agreed upon for inclusion was analysed after which they were categorised according to six emerging themes. Whilst some publications could logically be sorted under more than one theme, a joint decision was made with regard to the most relevant category for each publication with reference made to dual foci of some publications in the discussion of themes. Based on the underlying philosophies of each theme, an association between the themes and the theoretical-conceptual framework was rationalised through deductive reasoning to report on the findings and to answer the research question.

## Findings

The initial search of databases delivered a total of 1006 studies as explicated in Table 1. After using the criteria for inclusion, a total of 43 studies were analysed and classified according to general themes related to teacher autonomy and teacher reflectivity as reported in the findings, conclusions and/or suggestions of these studies.

Table 1  
*Publications Identified Through Systematic Literature Review*

Number of publications	Initial search of databases	Included after selection
EBSCOhost	25	5
Science Direct	622	4
Web of Science	251	8
Scopus	34	9
Google Scholar	74	7
<b>Total publications</b>	<b>1006</b>	<b>33</b>
Identified from reference lists or other sources	10	10
<b>Total publications analysed</b>		<b>43</b>

### *Analysis and discussion of the findings*

After the initial analysis of the total publications included in the systematic literature review, 10 themes emerged. Further in-depth analysis of the underlying philosophies of each theme, motivated us to merge themes based on common grounding philosophies, resulting in a total of 6 themes that allowed for a meaningful categorisation of all publications that met the criteria for inclusion. Reporting on each theme is firstly grounded in the underlying philosophies or theories that informed the thematic synthesis, followed by a discussion of the literature sorted under each.

The classification of the 43 publications according to the six emerging themes is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2  
*Classification of Identified Literature Under Emerging Themes*

Themes emerging from the analysis	Literature based on keywords related to teacher reflectivity and teacher autonomy	Research design
1. EFL teaching-learning approaches grounded in teacher autonomy (12)		
• Post-method pedagogy (PMP) in EFL education (4)	Fat'hi et al. (2015) Fathi and Hamidzadeh (2018) Khodabakhshzadeh et al. (2018) Motallebzadeh et al. (2018)	Quant Mixed Quant Quant
• The EFL teacher as researcher (5)	Gholami and Mehrmohammadi (2014) Sangani and Selma (2012) Rahimi and Weisi (2018b) Rahimi and Weisi (2018a) Mehrani (2017)	Qual Qual Mixed Quant Qual
• Critical	Abednia (2012)	Qual

pedagogy in EFL education (3)	Tavakoli and Sadeghi (2011) Safari (2017)	Qual Qual
2. The role of teacher reflectivity in teaching-learning outcomes (6)	Fani (2017) Kabi Rahnama et al. (2013) Tabatabaee Yazdi et al. (2017) Babai and Asadnia (2019) Fahim et al. (2013) Rahimi and Soryani (2014)	Quant Quant Qual Qual Mixed Quant
3. Centralized/top-down education system (6)	Khezerlou (2013) Hashemi Moghaddam et al. (2019) Baniasad-zadeh (2016) Rahimi and Alavi (2017) Beehroozi and Osam (2016) Mirzaee and Aliakbari (2018)	Quant Qual Qual Qual Quant Qual
4. Teaching experience and environment (4)	Baleghizadeh and Shahri (2014) Tajeddin et al. (2018) Kheirzadeh and Sistani (2018) Soodmand Afshar and Farhani (2018)	Qual Qual Mixed Quant
5. Teacher job satisfaction (3)	Shirazizadeh and Karimipour (2019) Javadi (2014) Jofreh et al. (2013)	Quant Quant Quant
6. Teacher self-concept (12)	Moslemi and Habibi (2019) Rahimi and Riyasati (2015) Motalebzadeh and Kazemi (2018) Noormohammadi (2014) Ghonsooly and Ghanizadeh (2013) Babaei and Abednia (2016) Ravandpour (2019) Tajjedin and Adeh (2016) Masoumpannah and Zarei (2014) Kafi (2016) Karimi and Mofidi (2019) Sahargard and Rasti (2017)	Quant Quant Quant Quant Quant Quant Quant Mixed Mixed Quant Quant Qual Qual

### ***Theme 1: EFL teaching-learning approaches grounded in teacher autonomy***

Twelve publications focused on methodologies reliant on the active role of teachers concerning pedagogical choices as well as their own professional development. These methodologies are cogently dependent on teacher autonomy. Three related subthemes became evident namely *post-method pedagogy (PMP)*, the *teacher as researcher* (with specific reference to action research) and *critical pedagogy*.

#### *Subtheme 1: PMP in EFL education*

The idea of PMP originated with Kumaravadivelu (1994, p. 27) and is grounded in the idea that second language (L2) teachers should be empowered with “knowledge, skill, and autonomy”, and is based on the “parameters of particularity, practicality and possibility” (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p. 537). This approach, informed by “principled pragmatism”, is suggested as a countermeasure to the rigid and restrictive method-based approach and underscores the role of teacher autonomy and self-directed learning through reflection on practice where they develop an intuitive

“awareness of what constitutes good teaching.” (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p. 542). PMP thus underlines the active role of the teacher in questioning determinants that may influence practice within a specific teaching context. Considering the theoretical-conceptual framework that directed our investigation, teacher autonomy, teacher reflectivity and teacher self-directed learning from and in practice through inquiry are foundational principles of this pedagogical approach.

During the initial systematic literature review, two publications with a focus on PMP were identified, with two more emerging during an extended search. Although more literature with a focus on this pedagogy came up during the search, these four publications focused on the value of PMP based on features related to the identified keywords and research question. The study by Fat'hi et al. (2015) validated the compatibility of post-method and teacher reflectivity approaches to EFL education. They report that both approaches “advocate the individual, informed decision of teachers triggered by reflection and reflective practices” (Fat'hi et al. 2015, p.316).

Fathi and Hamidzadeh (2018) developed and validated an instrument to measure EFL teachers' willingness to implement PMP based on the three components of PMP as proposed by Kumaravadivelu (2001). Using this instrument, together with the English Language Teaching Reflection Inventory (Akbari et al., 2010) they investigated the relationship between EFL teacher willingness to implement PMP and their reflectivity. Apart from their findings on the validity of the instrument, they report a positive relationship between these two characteristics of the participating English language teachers from different institutes, schools, and centres of higher education in Iran.

Khodabakhshzadeh et al. (2018), as well as Motallebzadeh et al. (2018) used the instrument developed by Fat'hi et al. (2015) to investigate the relationship between EFL teachers' willingness to apply PMP and positive learning outcomes. Both studies showed a positive relationship between these two variables based on data collected from EFL teachers and students from private language institutes. Motallebzadeh et al. (2018) conclude that PMP has the potential to free teachers from the enslavement and obstacles created by the Grammar translation method and audio-lingual approaches to teaching EFL, that focus on form rather than function that are predominant in the EFL education system of Iran. The motive for developing and implementing an instrument aiming to measure pedagogy that is geared at autonomous teaching practice such as the PMP, strengthens the surmise that these educationists are striving for a more autonomous, self-directed and reflective approach to EFL teaching practice.

#### *Subtheme 2: The EFL teacher as researcher*

Through action research, teachers are actively and deliberately learning from experience in practice through iterative cycles of reflection on deficiencies in practice, planning and implementing possible solutions and revising teaching-learning strategies (Noffke & Somekh, 2009). The myriad literature confirming the value of action research for both the improvement of practice and teacher professional development (Elliott, 1991; Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Leitch & Day, 2000; Noffke & Somekh, 2009), as well as the role of action research in supporting teacher autonomy in diverse teaching contexts (Hathorn & Dillon, 2018; Mello et al. 2008) strongly relates to our research question. A self-directed and self-reflective approach to own professional learning is inherent to action research as confirmed by Kemmis (2009), postulating that critical reflection through action research empowers teachers to effect sustainable change in their teaching practice.

Five publications refer to the role of the Iranian EFL teacher as researcher and convey the notion that when teachers are involved in research, their knowledge of practice is developed. Gholami and Mehrmohammadi (2014, p. 346) investigated teacher researcher pedagogy (TRP) by analysing

narratives of EFL teachers involved in TRP. They conclude that action research stimulates an epistemological shift in the EFL teacher professionalism from relying on knowledge transfer from a third-party person to a professional identity that puts them in a power position, reflecting teacher autonomy. Sangani and Stelma (2012) collected data through observation, interviews and collaborative dialogues centred on common issues identified through action research. They confirm the value of action research in supporting EFL teacher reflection, enabling teachers to identify their weaknesses and to suggest a plan of action to improve EFL practice. However, from their small sample, they concluded that teachers' reflections mostly mirrored a self-centred focus with limited evidence of action taken to improve their own knowledge and practice.

A study by Rahimi and Weisi (2018b) involving 150 EFL teachers confirms that EFL teachers who conduct action research are more inclined to reflect on their practice, while they also were rated higher with regard to their self-efficacy beliefs. Considering the role these variables play in continuous professional learning and the transformation of education, these positive relationships could serve as motivation to include action research in teacher development programmes. Rahimi and Weisi (2018a) report on the positive view of EFL teachers towards practice-based research and the positive impact it has on their professional teaching practice. These findings concur with that of Mehrani (2017), who collected data from EFL teachers through a survey with narrative frames, reflective essays and individual interviews. This study confirms the value of action research in supporting a practice focus while the EFL teachers experienced action research as valuable in developing their teaching skills, thereby strengthening the proposition that self-directed learning through action research supports teacher reflection and empowers them to make decisions in the best interest of their learners.

Findings of the studies sorted under this sub-theme unanimously support the value of action research in fostering Iranian EFL teacher self-directed learning when these teachers apply reflective inquiry into factors related to their own practices. Teachers who take the time and initiative to evaluate their own practices through action research also demonstrate the aptitude to act as autonomous professionals who strive to improve their own teaching.

### *Subtheme 3: Critical pedagogy in EFL education*

Critical pedagogy is grounded in Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1970, 1993), arguing for education to be freed from the 'banking concept of education' where knowledge is transferred from the knowledgeable to those who need the knowledge. Freire denounces education that reflects an ideology of oppression, refuting the role of inquiry in education. Freire's pedagogy puts emphasis on shared learning by both the teacher and the learner, and the role of teacher and learner self-directed learning is prominent by promoting critical reflection by both the teacher and the learner. Although this approach refutes teacher authority but rather supports shared teacher-learner authority, the implementation of such an approach in an oppressive or authoritative education system will clearly require a measure of teacher autonomy in which the teacher may choose pedagogical approaches and has the freedom to create a classroom culture where the teacher and the learners are jointly responsible for the teaching and the learning.

Three publications with a focus on the role of critical pedagogy in EFL education met the criteria for inclusion in the systematic literature review. Findings on a qualitative participatory action research by Abednia (2012) demonstrate the potential of a critical EFL teacher education course, based on the principles of critical pedagogy, to redefine teachers' professional identity from an instrumentalist orientation to a critical/transformational orientation to practice. Abednia (2012) delineates that it remains a challenge for EFL teachers to redefine their identity to become transformational intellectuals because of the "fear of consequences of opposing the status quo, and, consequently, prefer to take the dystopian path of conformity, loss of voice, and lack of drive to

reclaim their identities” (Abednia 2012, p. 713). Tavakoli and Sadeghi (2011) also suggest more critical pedagogical EFL teaching strategies and a self-directed approach to the professional development of EFL teachers, such as critical ethnography, in which the social context of the learners is recognised and teachers question the social, moral and political value of what they do in support of a more social justice praxis. Their study focused on a single EFL teacher who applied the theoretical principles and concepts of critical pedagogy. While the authors report on the value of critical ethnography in supporting teacher autonomy, self-reflectivity, multivocality, transformative practice, and to “create a bridge to self-directed professionalism” (Tavakoli & Sadeghi 2011, p. 271), mention is also made of the barrier caused by the authoritative education system in Iran which may not allow teachers the autonomy to act on their own findings.

In a similar vein, Safari (2017) believes that when the teacher’s role is restricted to the mere implementation of the curriculum as prescribed by authorities, teacher autonomy is negated while they are regarded as technicians rather than professionals. Safari argues for an approach to EFL that allows teachers the freedom to make pedagogical choices to suit their specific teaching context. Safari investigated EFL teachers’ experiences of their role as ‘transformative intellectuals’ through the implementation of critical pedagogy. The participants - 26 EFL teachers from four private language institutes - were first supplied with knowledge of critical pedagogy and then asked to apply the theoretical principles and concepts of this approach in their teaching sessions. This case study revealed that critical pedagogy holds value for the transformation of EFL education by giving teachers and students a voice, creating a positive learning atmosphere in the classroom and supporting teachers’ and learners’ critical thinking ability. However, challenges hampering transformations were reported, such as a lack of knowledge and skills to affect transformation, the absence of teacher autonomy and an unsupportive environment.

It is apparent that literature discussed under this theme with focus on the role of PMP, action research and critical pedagogy in EFL education not only strengthens the argument for EFL teacher autonomy and active involvement in their practices but also supports the relation between teacher autonomy, the use of pedagogical strategies grounded in teacher reflectivity and teacher self-directed learning. When teachers are engaged in these strategies, they become aware of existing problems, collect data or resources to solve the problems and take action that could lead to the transformation of EFL education, thus continuous critical reflection on their own practice implies self-directed teacher learning that will have a greater impact on learning outcomes (Kelley, 2012; Lamb, 2008). The number of publications in this area also confirms the call for a more active role to be played by EFL teachers in their practice in order to transform education standards.

### ***Theme 2: The role of EFL teacher reflectivity in teaching-learning outcomes***

Farrell’s (2015b) definition of reflective practice, as discussed in the theoretical-conceptual framework, implies a measure of teacher autonomy as a precondition to motivate teachers to reflect on practice; if a teacher is not granted autonomy to make decisions for best practice, it will also be pointless to reflect on practice. The interrelatedness of teacher reflectivity and teacher autonomy resulted in publications sorted under this theme to also strongly relate to the other themes. However, six publications explicitly focus on the influence of teacher reflectivity on teaching practice as well as on learning outcomes.

The study conducted by Fani (2017, p. 2) discloses a positive correlation between reflective teaching and teacher autonomy. Grounded in the view that autonomy provides teachers “more opportunities of exploration” that will consequently support “efficient and effective learning”, teacher autonomy could benefit teaching and learning outcomes through heightened teacher reflectivity. In their study with a focus on the students’ experiences of the controlling behaviour

of their teachers, Kabi Rahnama et al. (2013) came to the conclusion that when English teachers reflect on their teaching practice and adjust their teaching style, they also develop autonomy-supportive behaviour. Kabi Rahnama et al. (2013) therefore propose that self-directed teacher learning through self-reflection as a trademark of autonomous teaching practice can motivate teachers to also support learner autonomy.

Tabatabaee Yazdi et al. (2017) proposed and validated a multidimensional model for EFL teachers' Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes based on teacher decision-making, reflection and collaboration as well as updating teacher knowledge and skills. These components are aimed at assisting teachers to face their work challenges and obtain learning goals, pointing towards teacher autonomy. Findings confirm an interrelationship between these components and highlight the importance and the extent to which CPD may influence teachers' reflection and their decisions in educational settings. Babaii and Asadnia (2019) also report on the value of collaborative reflection by EFL teachers as confirmed through their case study, showing that increasing teacher autonomy empowers teachers to have agency in their language assessment processes resulting in improved learning outcomes.

The study conducted by Fahim et al. (2013) revealed that EFL learner achievement in communication is positively related to teachers' self-monitoring, referring to teachers' critical reflection on their own strategies and their students' problems which help teachers become more autonomous in their teaching activities. Critical reflection is also emphasised in the report by Rahimi and Soryani (2014), with a focus on the positive relationship between higher critical thinking abilities of EFL teachers and learning outcomes. They suggest that teacher education should promote higher order thinking skills leading to a more questioning attitude by teachers on prescribed instructional materials and teaching methods. Teachers should move towards a 'negotiated syllabus in their teaching' suggesting a measure of autonomy in which teachers reflect on and analyse their teaching context when making decisions about suitable strategies and content.

The literature in this theme also strongly reflects the interconnected concepts that form part of the theoretical- conceptual framework, including self-directed teacher learning.

### ***Theme 3: Centralised or top-down education system***

The concepts of centralisation and top-down education structures are important determinants of teacher autonomy with specific reference to the way such approaches may hamper the teacher taking ownership of their own teaching practice and the contextualising of the curriculum in educational institutions. In a centralised education context, the power is mostly vested in a central body such as the government or an institution, which makes decisions concerning education, including resources and curriculum (Brennen, 2002), and thus may be considered as hindering teachers' decision making and autonomy.

Although more publications identified through the review mentioned the role of the centralised education system of English language education in Iran, six publications report on the effect of such an approach on teacher autonomy and the quality of EFL. A comparative study by Khezerlou (2013) illustrated lower autonomy perceptions of Iranian high school EFL teachers in comparison to Turkish EFL teachers. Khezerlou ascribes this mainly to the centralised EFL curriculum in Iran and reports that Iranian EFL teachers are of the opinion that the curriculum should be less confined, their voices should be heard, and they should be involved in decision-making processes. The findings of this study are in line with that of Hashemi Moghadam et al. (2019), Rahimi and Alavi (2017), Baniasad-Azad et al. (2016), as well as Safari (2017), already

included in Theme 1, all pointing to the fact that a lack of EFL teacher autonomy in Iran is influenced by the top-down power structure of the education system. These studies confirm the supposition that Iranian EFL teachers are often controlled by authorities, and not involved in decision-making procedures.

While Hashemi Moghadam et al. (2019) confirm the influence of political and economic issues, resulting in unfair power relations in education structures, findings by Baniasad-Azad et al. (2016) specifically show that the top-down education curriculum prevents teachers and teacher educators from implementing creative or experience-driven strategies based on the realities at a practice level. Rahimi and Alavi (2017, p. 497) emphasize that a top-down implementation of curriculum change results in a “mismatch between the ideal goals and the real situation” which is a direct consequence of negating the role of the teacher as well as the teaching conditions in curriculum development. These authors report that “teachers demand to be more professionally empowered to be able to execute [the] communicative approach more fully in their classes”, implying that a top-down approach does not allow teachers the freedom to apply curriculum changes in a way that matches their specific teaching context. Likewise, Behroozi and Osrani (2016, p. 96) came to the conclusion that the centralised and top-down approaches to education in private language institutes in Iran regard teachers as “class performers and presenters who have little say in making major decisions”. This conclusion is echoed in a study by Mirzaee and Aliakbari (2017), reporting that Iranian EFL teachers’ identities are highly socially constructed and constrained with no room for personal agency.

The literature under this theme conjointly sends a message to Iranian policy makers and administrators to include teachers in curriculum planning. When teachers acknowledge themselves as autonomous professionals who have a valuable role to play in curriculum structure and content, they may also be more motivated to take ownership of their practice, to reflect on teaching and learning strategies, content, student needs, and learning outcomes and to gain knowledge and skills that they lack, through self-directed teacher learning. Such self-directed professional development, as opposed to a more autocratic approach, holds value in supporting the sustainable transformation of education standards (Lopes & Cunha, 2017; Slavits & McDuffie, 2013).

#### ***Theme 4: Teaching experience and teaching environment***

The publications sorted under this theme specifically focus on the influence of prior teaching experience (as opposed to novice teachers) on aspects related to teacher autonomy and reflectivity. Although there is a common view in the literature that experienced teachers are more inclined to take ownership of their practice and demonstrate greater reflectivity based on their larger experiential knowledge (Guichon, 2009; McIntyre, 1933), other factors also play a role in the way teachers gain from experience, such as teacher motivation, interest and autonomy granted to choose their own learning goals (Louws et al. 2017).

The four publications within this theme agree that the more experienced teachers tend to develop a more autonomous approach to their practice. A case study based on three teachers’ accounts on the way they mastered English themselves and how they teach it (Baleghizadeh & Shahri, 2014) revealed that experienced teachers act more autonomously in comparison to novice teachers. Of more significance is their conclusion that experienced teachers’ have more elaborate and sophisticated theories of practice, implying the development of a more reflective approach to own practice over time. This “theorization of practice signifies heightened awareness and an effort to unravel the complexity of teaching” (Baleghizadeh & Shahri, 2014, p. 752), reflecting a more autonomous approach to practice.

A comparative study by Tajeddin et al. (2018) reports more consistency in experienced EFL teachers' competence in assessment literacy compared to novice teachers with specific focus on the assessment of students' speaking proficiency. The inconsistency of novice teachers' assessment practices is attributed to the pressure caused by prescribed assessment approaches imposed on them that may not match their prior knowledge, skills and beliefs. In contrast, experienced teachers demonstrated more autonomy by reflecting on practice as well as on their prior knowledge and experience gained in various competence levels, contributing to greater consistency between experienced teachers' knowledge, beliefs and practice over time.

Although Kheirzadeh and Sistani (2018) do not specifically refer to teacher autonomy, their findings confirm the superior reflective ability of experienced teachers, compared to novice teachers, supported by factors such as a firm knowledge base and "adequately developed ideas to connect their theoretical and practical knowledge to their teaching action" (p. 152) as well as opportunities to gain experience in different teaching contexts. These authors acknowledge the role of critical reflection on own practice and decisions, as well as the educational and ethical implications of those decisions on practice. The significant role of teaching experience in teacher autonomy has also been implicitly reiterated by Soodmand Afshar and Farahani (2018), reporting that experienced teachers are more likely to be involved in making decisions with regard to, among others, their teaching practice and syllabus design.

The literature identified under this theme mostly confirms that experienced teachers tend to embrace reflectivity which is distinctive of teacher autonomy. More experienced teachers will thus be less pressured to follow prescribed frameworks for teaching, learning and assessment if it does not match their own beliefs about practice based on their prior experience, and they are also more inclined to reflect on their practice as well as the teaching and learning context. The central role of prior experience in teacher reflection and teacher autonomy strengthens the surmise that increased teacher autonomy has the potential to foster self-directed teacher learning.

### ***Theme 5: EFL Teacher job satisfaction***

While international literature confirms the relationship between teacher autonomy and teacher job satisfaction (Cardenas-Ramos, 2006; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014), as well as between teacher autonomy and student outcome (Cardenas-Ramos, 2006; Tahirsylaj, 2019), concern is expressed relating to increased stress experienced by teachers, leading to lower job-satisfaction and teacher burnout (Herman et al. 2018). Job-related stress can be detrimental to successful teaching and learning outcomes (Ipek et al., 2018).

Three publications highlighted the relationship between Iranian EFL teacher autonomy (or related concepts) and aspects associated with job satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, including stress related to teaching responsibilities and teacher burnout. While the publication of Shirazizadeh et al. (2019), focused more on teacher identity than teacher autonomy, it strongly supports the role of teacher reflection in EFL education outcomes (Theme 2). They report that reflection as part of a professional identity may prevent teacher burnout. Their focus on identity clearly relates to an identity of teacher autonomy in which "reflection requires the devotion of time and resources by the teacher to identify the problems and come up with solutions" (Shirazizadeh et al. 2019, p. 9), that resembles characteristics of self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975). Their findings concur with that of Javadi (2014), who reports an inverse relationship between teacher autonomy and teacher burnout. Jofreh et al. (2013) investigated the quality of EFL high school teachers' work life. Amongst other reasons, they attribute the medium-to-low level of job satisfaction to the fossilized role of teachers who are not granted autonomy and to a lack of professional teacher identity.

The influence of job satisfaction on Iranian EFL teachers' attitude towards their practice is evident from the literature discussed under this theme. Furthermore, the relation between teacher job satisfaction, teacher attitude and student learning is confirmed by international research (Sahito & Vaisanen, 2020; Toropova et al. 2021). Toropova et al. (2021) also refer to the relation between professional satisfaction and teacher turnover rate and the negative influence of a high teacher turnover on overall school performance. Findings of a literature review implemented by Sahito and Vaisanen (2020) that included studies from 21 developing countries, including Iran, list an autocratic management style amongst the main factors affecting job dissatisfaction. Authorities, including private or state institutions, should therefore pay heed to the influence teacher autonomy may have on teachers' professional satisfaction if effective learning is regarded as a priority. Teachers who are not granted autonomy may be less enthusiastic about their practice, less motivated to keep abreast of the recent developments in EFL education and to reflect on their teaching practice or to develop themselves professionally, leading to a lack of teacher self-directed teacher learning that will consequently also hamper the standard of education.

### ***Theme 6: Teacher self-concept***

The interrelatedness between teacher autonomy, teacher agency and teacher identity (Teng, 2019) motivated us to use these concepts as substitutes for teacher autonomy in our database searches, although the literature differentiates between them. Similarly, terms such as self-esteem and self-efficacy are used interchangeably in the literature when discussing aspects of self-judgment or self-attitudes whereby a person evaluates his/her own worth and competence in the world (Oyserman et al. 2012). Based on the definition of self-concept by Oyserman and Markus (1998, cited by Oyserman et al. 2012, p. 72) as "cognitive structures that can include content, attitudes or evaluative judgments" that are "used to make sense of the world, focus attention on one's goals and protect one's sense of basic worth", it made sense to group publications which focus on these related aspects, under self-concept as an umbrella term.

A total of 12 studies focused on EFL teacher self-efficacy with three publications reporting a positive correlation between EFL teachers' professional identity and their self-efficacy including Moslemi and Habibi (2019), Rahimi and Riyasati (2015), Motalebzadeh and Kazemi (2018) and Noormohammadi (2014), whose findings also strongly support themes 5 and 6. Ghonsooly and Ghanizadeh (2013) report a strong relationship between EFL teachers' self-regulation and their self-efficacy in practice and that through self-regulation, EFL teachers are in control of their own learning, implying self-directed teacher learning supported by teacher autonomy.

The relationship between teacher reflectivity and self-efficacy as part of self-concept is highlighted by several studies sorted under this theme. Babaei and Abednia (2016) reveal that reflectivity is correlated with teachers' self-efficacy with strong indication that teacher reflectivity and self-efficacy are supported by teacher agency and its interaction with the wider society. This positive correlation between EFL reflective practice and teacher self-efficacy is also confirmed by Rahimi and Weisi (2018a) (see Theme 1). Work by Ravandpour (2019) builds onto the study of Tabatabaee Yazdi et al. (2017) (Theme 2) and reports that all the subscales of CPD (teachers' collaboration, decision making, reflectivity and updating of their knowledge) are positive significant predictors of teacher self-efficacy and that teachers with a good decision-making ability have a high self-efficacy. International literature also confirms this role of teacher reflectivity in good decision making (Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1993; Farrell, 2015a) as well as the dependency of good decision making on teacher autonomy (Barr, 2017; Griffith et al. 2013) and self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975).

Four publications sorted under this theme focus on the role of EFL professional teacher identity in teacher self-concept. The link between professional teacher identity, autonomy and self-directed development is supported by the study conducted by Tajjedin and Adeh (2016), revealing that non-native English teachers, including those teaching EFL in Iran, lack self-awareness of their own role or identity as an English teacher. More importantly, the study showed that teachers often have a misconception of their own competence, suggesting that teacher education programmes should raise teachers' awareness of their own professional status and their role in effecting successful learning. Similarly, a study by Masoumpanah and Zarei (2014) highlights the role of teacher self-awareness and professional identity in realising teaching aims. While this study shows that Iranian EFL teachers in private language institutes demonstrate a strong sense of professional identity and high self-efficacy beliefs with regard to standard English teaching, these self-efficacy beliefs did not equally apply to the teaching of English as an international language. Teacher identity should thus be continuously reframed to match a teacher's professional context. Such reframing involves teacher autonomy and motivation to master the new competencies or those they lack, through continuous self-reflection and self-directed learning. Findings reported by Kafi and Motalebzadeh (2016) echo that of Masoumpanah and Zarei (2014), with emphasis on the link between teachers' individual identity and their professional development and behaviour.

Through the lens of cultural-historical activity theory, Karimi and Mofidi (2019) examined how teacher identity is formed through their past personal life experiences and report that teachers' identity is a multifaceted understanding of themselves, informed by the interaction between "personal characteristics, including their past experiences, and cultural, historical, social, institutional, and environmental factors" (Karimi & Mofidi, 2019, p. 124). The general emerging theme, latching onto Theme 4 (teaching experience and teaching environment), reflects the impact of past experiences in shaping teachers' identity and beliefs of who they are and what they are capable of and puts emphasis on the crucial role of government, the ministry of education and management of educational institutions in the construction of teacher identity. If teachers experience that they are respected as autonomous professionals who can be trusted with decision-making regarding pedagogy and curriculum, the chances are that their behaviour will reflect this professional identity grounded in a positive self-concept and most possibly motivate self-directed professional development.

The study by Sahragard and Rasti (2017) refers to the effect of Iran's centralised education system on teacher actions and agency (Theme 3), although their main focus is on understanding Iranian English teacher agency, which they view as interrelated to teacher autonomy. They define teacher agency as "the way teachers perceive and react to the ever-changing dynamics of their immediate educational setting and even the further removed local and global forces impacting on their life and career" (p. 146). Although the teachers showed critical and reflective awareness of the factors affecting English language teaching in Iran, such as the enforced curriculum, they failed to demonstrate a critical questioning attitude towards their own assumptions and practice based on past experiences. The concern of these authors relates to a lack of teacher self-awareness and the role they themselves can play in changing the education dynamics. In this sense teacher agency established through critical reflection on own beliefs and assumptions could support teacher self-directed learning as well as EFL learning outcomes. EG

The literature related to teacher self-concept confirms that when EFL teachers identify themselves as professionals, they have a deep awareness of their responsibility to adhere to the characteristics expected from a professional teacher which will, in turn, serve as motivation to apply self-directed learning strategies to attain skills or knowledge they lack. Likewise, when teachers are trusted with the autonomy to make decisions for best practice, it is forthcoming that teachers will be more inclined to identify themselves as professionals.

## Limitations

While the systematic literature review made it possible to explore trends in the body of scholarship with focus on the research question, limitations need to be taken into consideration. Results of this review have been confined to the literature included in the data set and although interpretations are supported by prominent literature, it could have been influenced by researcher subjectivity. Findings are limited to the literature included in the systematic literature review by a rigid application of the identified keywords directly related to the research question. This could have excluded literature that may have contributed meaningfully to the findings. However, the number of publications that emerged using these specific keywords was so vast that it was not possible to include all. The broad scope of Google Scholar made the use of this database for the scientific literature review a cumbersome process and we would advise the use of principal sources that will provide greater search precision. The review process was not subjected to peer review, which could have strengthened its trustworthiness. However, the aim of the study was to identify general trends in the large body of scholarship with the focus on the research question, and not to conduct an exhaustive review of all available literature in this field.

## Conclusion

The themes that emerged through the scientific literature review revealed the multifaceted interrelatedness between teacher autonomy and teacher reflectivity and the different effects this relationship may have on self-directed learning by Iranian EFL teachers. The literature furthermore confirmed the role to be played by EFL teacher self-directed learning in the transformation of EFL in Iran that again puts emphasis on the way EFL teachers are entrusted with choices for their practice that will, in turn, serve as motivation for a reflective approach to practice. While the emerging themes strongly confirm the interrelationship between teacher autonomy and teacher reflectivity, as well as the notion that reflective practice has the potential to transform the standard of EFL through teacher self-directed learning, such a transformation is reliant on teachers' autonomy. Grounding the theoretical-conceptual framework of the systematic literature review in the work of acclaimed theorists such as Mezirow (2009, 1998, 1990) and Knowles (1975), as well as that of renowned educationists who focus on issues related to teacher reflectivity (Brookfield, 2017) and effective language education such as Farrell (2015a, 2015b), contributes to the meaningfulness of the findings for EFL education in contexts other than Iran.

It can thus be concluded that granting EFL teachers more autonomy and involving them in choices made for best practice for their specific teaching contexts, hold value for teacher self-directed learning through continuous critical reflection on own practice, which could lead to improved EFL practice. While teacher autonomy refers to a "right to freedom from control (or an ability to exercise this right) as well as actual freedom from control" (Benson, 2000, p. 111), the making of choices for best practice for a specific teaching context is highly dependent on political, social and individual factors (Adams & Povey, 2018; Lundström, 2015; Moomaw, 2005). Safari (2017) confirms the interrelated role of teacher autonomy, teacher reflectivity and teacher self-directed learning in the context of EFL in Iran and calls for greater EFL teacher autonomy to support self-directed teacher learning. The teaching environment, including socio-political forces, school management style and the prescribed curriculum, are determinants of teacher autonomy that will in turn influence teacher reflectivity and consequently also teacher self-directed learning.

Mention is made in the literature of the way current education systems "enslave" teachers (Motallebzadeh & Kazemi, 2018, p. 54) as well as the lack of freedom to make pedagogical choices (Khezerlou, 2013; Safari, 2017). This lack of teacher autonomy could influence teacher motivation to investigate their own practices and to reflect on their practices to make more

informed choices for practice. EFL teachers in Iran and globally should therefore be involved in decision making and curriculum planning and granted autonomy as professional teachers to make informed pedagogical choices for better practice for their specific teaching context, to address the inconsistencies between teaching-learning aims and actual learning outcomes. Disregarding the professional identity and autonomy of EFL teachers will thus not only impede teacher reflectivity but also their self-directed learning skills and continued professional development, while EFL learners' frustration with poor English competence, irrespective of years and money spent on mastering the language, will remain.

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